

Obama's shuttle diplomacy

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President Barack Obama's unusual tour of Capitol Hill this week could answer a central question dogging his renewed effort to strike a grand bargain on deficit reduction:

How serious is he?

Starting Tuesday, Obama will shuttle between basement House meeting rooms and ornate Senate parlors, giving Republicans and Democrats a rare opportunity over three days to press him directly on how far he's willing to go on taxes and entitlements to complete a comprehensive deal — a major piece of unfinished business from his first term.

The shuttle diplomacy is a new tactic for the president, who kept his distance from Congress for most of his presidency. He seems to believe that if he looks Republicans — and Democrats — in the eye, they will think he sincerely wants a big deal to contain the deficit and honestly wants to tackle the big problems, despite the large policy gulf between them.

Obama allies say the president might be able to convert a few Republicans if he listens to their concerns and pays them special attention. But the differences between the two parties aren't surface-level issues that can be smoothed over by coddling. They are deep and defining principles. If Obama fails to hit the right notes, his overtures may only exacerbate GOP concerns.

And this week's meetings could begin easing the tense Obama-GOP relationship, fractured by years of failed entreaties, miscommunication, scorched-earth campaign tactics and deep ideological differences.

But the expectations for a sustainable civil alliance and a grand bargain remain low for one very simple reason: The parties are further apart on taxes and entitlements than they were in 2011, when Obama and House Speaker John Boehner (R-Ohio) first entered into talks and came close to striking the ever-elusive grand bargain.

Take tax reform — something both sides want. Obama says an overhaul of the tax code should include new revenue to help pay down the national debt and offset spending cuts. But Republicans, still sour over agreeing to \$600 billion in tax rate hikes as part of the fiscal cliff deal, are more adamant than ever that tax reform not raise a dime of new revenue.

Congressional Democratic leaders are firmly opposed to entitlement changes such as raising the Medicare eligibility age and restructuring Social Security — both just a starting point for Republicans in a negotiation. Obama is somewhere in the middle, willing to go further than his party on entitlements if he gets enough in return from Republicans on taxes. How far, however, is unclear.

White House press secretary Jay Carney said Monday that the meetings shouldn't be mistaken for real budget negotiations.

"He's meeting with, I guess, potentially 535 lawmakers, so I wouldn't expect that they're going to trade paper on numbers," Carney said.

And Obama's Capitol Hill crusade is unlikely to convert a broad swath of Republicans to support his agenda, GOP aides said.

The best Obama could hope for is that he'll gain leverage — and maybe a modicum of trust — with lawmakers skeptical of his intentions.

"I feel like this is the seventh sequel of a movie. When do the characters fall in love and go off into the sunset?" said Jim Kessler, vice president for policy at Third Way, a centrist strategy group. "The romantic tension has worn a little thin."

White House officials said the meetings have a very basic purpose: Obama wants to personally tell rank-and-file Republicans what he's put on the table in the past.

There's evidence, these officials said, that some Republicans aren't aware of his concessions. They cite a column last week by The Washington Post's Ezra Klein that recounted a background briefing with a prominent House Republican who claimed that Obama had never proposed changing the inflation calculator for federal government programs, including Social Security.

In fact, Obama's last offer to Boehner is posted on the White House website — and it includes the less generous inflation calculator known as chained CPI.

"He looks forward to making clear what his policy positions are, to making clear his sincerity when it comes to his belief that we need to take action on our deficit, but to do it in a balanced way that enhances rather than harms economic growth, that strengthens rather than weakens the middle class," Carney said.

There are also procedural hurdles that would make a potential deal tough: Boehner and Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) insist that all legislation go through the lengthy committee process in an attempt to close the era of intense, one-on-one negotiations between the White House and congressional leaders.

And the release this week of competing budget proposals will only illustrate the depth of the divisions — with House Republicans still focused on repealing Obamacare and Senate Democrats aiming for higher taxes and more spending. The budget of Rep. Paul Ryan (R-Wis.) balances in 10 years. Senate Democrats and the White House are unlikely to come close to balance in the next decade.

Obama will also try to make a case for bipartisan cooperation on overhauling immigration, passing new gun laws, expanding pre-kindergarten education and raising the minimum wage, aides said.

But it won't be just Republicans who will need to be persuaded to follow his lead on fiscal issues.

Obama has talked about shared sacrifice from both parties, but he has not gotten to the point in deficit negotiations at which he's had to pressure rank-and-file Democratic lawmakers to cross their red line on the sacred issues. He angered Democrats by proposing controversial changes to Medicare, Medicaid and Social Security during his failed 2011 grand-bargain talks with Boehner. The president was ready to make some entitlement concessions in the fiscal cliff negotiations last month, but that effort fizzled, too.

Obama should signal that he's not interested just in negotiating but that he would campaign for a big deal, Kessler said.

"He needs to go beyond saying we need a balanced plan to challenge his party and use [Organizing for Action] to say we need this — make that a campaign," Kessler said. "The president, to his credit, has had entitlements on the table for a long time. That took courage. He's willing to do chain-weighted CPI, proposed some Medicare savings, that took courage. He sought a grand bargain and that took courage."

But, Kessler said, "he's got to be a loud advocate."

There are some Republicans who have heard what Obama has said and seem hopeful a deal could be struck.

For example, some Senate Republicans — folks like Sens. Tom Coburn of Oklahoma and Saxby Chambliss of Georgia — have signaled openness to new revenues as part of a big deal with Obama. But there are far fewer people who see the potential for common ground in Boehner's House.

That's why Wednesday's meeting between the House Republican Conference and Obama will be so crucial in determining the legislative future of a grand bargain on Capitol Hill.

GOP leadership is likely to handpick questioners from its conference to press Obama on things like tax reform and the budget process, sources said. This will come after House Republican Conference Chairwoman Cathy McMorris Rodgers of Washington state and Boehner give brief remarks to introduce the president.

There is a flip side to the heavy dose of skepticism that's being served on Capitol Hill.

There are actors who have an incentive to push for a deal. Boehner has always salivated at the prospect of a career-defining deficit compromise. Ways and Means Committee Chairman Dave Camp (R-Mich.), nearing the end of his tenure holding the gavel, and Senate Finance Committee Chairman Max Baucus (D-Mont.) have continued talking about tax reform as the rest of Washington has soured on the prospect.

For those lawmakers, this could be a defining moment.